

Reflection Paper

Subject: United States History

Grade: 8

Module 4: Assessment for Active Learning : Teacher implements instruction in order to engage students in rigorous and relevant learning and to promote their curiosity about the world at large by:

Selected Indicator: Providing students with assessment criteria and individualized, descriptive feedback to help them improve their performance and assume responsibility for their learning.

Goal:

I will use teaching DBQ's to explore and implement various types of assessments which will effectively measure the mastering of necessary skills and information by my students. I will use the various assessments to inform my ongoing planning and instruction, all while ensuring that my students continue to improve and master the necessary knowledge and skills.

Initial Summary:

My classroom assessment strategies have largely been based upon the use of formative and summative assessments including quizzes, chapter and unit tests and to a very minor extent, rubrics. In order to move my students forward, it is important to explore and implement assessment resources that will drive my instruction and lead to increased student achievement.

I will use DBQ units to investigate and implement assessment strategies in order to better understand the knowledge and skills that my students have mastered. The results of these assessment strategies will dictate if further instruction is necessary in order for my students to master skills in subsequent units.

Specifically, I will explore the use of the various components for instructing and assessing in the area of Document Based Questions. I will explore ways of giving more direct feedback on document based questions in order for my students to master writing quality responses.

Reflection:

I met with my TEAM Mentor and Common Core Literacy Coach and discussed various opportunities for growth in the area of using assessments to impact the success of my students in achieving lesson objectives.

As the expectations of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and curriculum documents are evolving to include the use of document-based questions (DBQ) and assessments that emphasize the use of document-based questions, I decided my students would benefit from opportunities to respond to DBQs in independent practice and assessment situations.

Development of New Learning

Through many discussions with my Literacy Coach and Mentor, I understood that it was important for me to implement units that offered my students practice in working with primary and secondary source documents and responding to DBQs to successfully demonstrate a deepening understanding of the content. I received some great suggestions that led to additional new learning in this area. As there is a great deal of new information regarding instruction and assessment using DBQs, I was encouraged to explore the internet for up to date information.

I reviewed an article written by Carolyn Henderson titled “4 Keys to Making DBQ Work in Middle School” posted on the Teaching Channel. Henderson addressed the importance of tying to a theme the structure of the associated questions, modifying available documents so that they provide the best possible structure for understanding the theme, and modeling how to answer the question or questions similar to the ones with which students will face on assessments so that they have the greatest opportunity for success.

I also read an article written by Michael Yell, on the National Council on Social Studies website, “What is the Best Way to Prepare Middle School Students for DBQs in History?” Yell discussed the difference between a high school Advanced Placement class and the use of full complex documents and how to adapt these documents so that they may be used for instructional and assessment purposes in middle school. Yell described the use of quotations or excerpts from larger documents and to use two or three documents rather than five or six, as middle school students are just beginning to work with documents of this complexity. He also recommended inserting grade level vocabulary in brackets within the document so that the material is more easily understood. An important part of the teaching, practicing and assessing cycle is use of small cooperative learning groups to explore and discuss the documents on individual instructional levels. In this way students show ownership of the material leading to improved literacy skills and added engagement of students in their learning and assessment.

In a PowerPoint from the Primary Source, Literacy in History/Social Studies: Strategies for the Middle School and High School Classrooms, Consultant Liz Howald discussed a few key important factors that should be considered when selecting sources to be used with DBQs in instruction and assessment opportunities. The focus of the key points emphasized that the length of the excerpts should be short with text supporting the overall understanding including key ideas and terms.

Howland asserted that there are several components that are important to understand when using DBQs in instruction and assessment in middle school. Short excerpts should be used with longer sections chunked and numbered, enough space should be given for students to write on the

document and focus should be on one or two skills prior to teaching additional skills in subsequent lessons.

Text-dependent assessment questions should require the use of textual evidence to support the constructed response. Questions should not be recall based, but should promote discussion and analysis as indicated by Norman Webb (2002) in his work on the Depth of Knowledge Levels (DOK). Level four of Webb's work leads students to extended understandings of the text. Finally, Howland shares that the depth of writing demonstrated by students is dependent on the type and construction of assessment questions.

Lastly, I explored the site dbqproject.com. The DBQ Project offers resources that include guiding a student through a grabber, writing a thesis statement and outlining an effective essay. There were several American History Mini-Qs.

Impact on Practice

In the past few years, I have used DBQs as part of my teaching and assessing of the pre-American Revolution. The end-of-unit assessment included a DBQ and supporting documents that assessed the students' ability to write a persuasive letter to the editor written from the point of view of either a patriot or loyalist.

The difficulty with the pre-American Revolution unit was the complexity of the documents. Based upon my new learning, I now understand that the DBQ experiences outlined throughout the unit were far too difficult for a middle school student's first exposure to a DBQ and related assessment activities. While some of the documents were brief, short excerpts, or pictures, many of the documents used old English, or were lengthy trial testimonies with awkward vocabulary that had not been modified for better understanding as Howland and Yell suggested. Many of the documents were obviously written on a high school or college Lexile level making them inaccessible to most middle school students. Based upon my new learning, I now understand that when I teach the American Revolution, I need to be mindful of the work of Howland and Yell prior to using DBQs in instruction and for assessment purposes.

As an 8th grade trip early in the school year, students traveled to Boston to walk the Freedom Trail. I decided that I would use this opportunity to introduce the pre-American Revolution including the Boston Massacre. I looked forward to introducing document-based questions. With the implementation of the CCSS, DBQs offered students opportunities to think about, within and beyond the text.

I knew that I needed to get a grasp of the schema on the American Revolution and the Boston Massacre that the students brought to the first class. Prior to any instruction, I distributed a pre-assessment DBQ and instructed students to work with the document without prior instruction. As Howland suggested, the DBQ layout was well constructed. There was a brief introduction that contained a primary source description of the Boston Massacre and an engraving created by Paul Revere. The pre-assessment included one question that asked students to think about the differences between the description and the engraving and a second question that required students to address the impact the engraving would have on the attitudes of colonists.

I collected the pre-assessments and evaluated each one looking for an effective restatement for each question, evidence of citing all five differences between the description and the depiction and determined if the student was able to infer the impact of the depiction throughout the colonies. The results of the pre-assessment were quite clear; 23 of 83 students effectively restated one or both questions, 14 of the students were able to cite the five differences between the description and the depiction with and seven of the eighty-three students clearly communicated the impact of the engraving throughout the colonies. It was important for me to give each student immediate feedback on the pre-assessment so that he or she would understand how to properly answer the questions. The results of the pre-assessment impacted my next teaching moves too. I knew what concepts needed to be reinforced and which needed to be introduced and taught for mastery. Additionally, the pre-assessment provided data that helped to define the teaching and learning for small instructional groups.

In a subsequent class, I gave students a copy of the Boston Massacre pre-assessment DBQ. As a part of new learning, I knew that it was important to make use of available technology in order to more effectively model for students. I projected the DBQ on the SMART Board and, as Henderson recommended, modeled how I would work with the document. Thinking aloud, I discussed the difference between primary and secondary sources and led students to discern that an eyewitness testimony is a primary source and that the depiction, while not a primary source of the Boston Massacre, was a primary source of propaganda for the time period. As we read the first few parts of the description, I would think aloud stopping at strategic points to ask, Is that in the depiction? I modeled how to annotate in the margins of the paper as Howland recommended.

The pre-assessment indicated that the students needed practice on successfully restating a question. I chose to have a discussion about the importance of restating and how students would restate the question. I provided opportunities for the students to practice restating questions and then asked them to share-out what they had written on their papers. The students realized greater success as evidenced by the coherent restatements of the DBQ. Additionally, the class used the annotations that they had written in the margins to help answer the question. We then proceeded to discuss the various political perspectives in the colonies, and I asked rhetorically, "If you were a fence-sitter, how would you feel about the engraving? If you were a loyalist would your perspective change?"

The results of the second DBQ-type assessment on the Boston Massacre indicated that 68 of 80 students effectively restated both questions and 12 of 80 students effectively restated one question. Seventy-two students were able to cite all differences between the description and the depiction and 71 students clearly communicated the impact of the engraving throughout the colonies.

The students were ready to move into the first official DBQ project of the year. The Salem Witch Hysteria DBQ would be engaging and motivating for the class. This DBQ required the use of primary and secondary sources and included a Biblical quote, sermon text, and a chart of the accusers and accused that denoted gender, age and marital status. Additionally, there was a map of Salem Village denoting location of accusers, defenders and accused witches, an etching of a witch physical examination, an excerpt of the trial testimony of Bridget Bishop, and a medical explanation and drawing. Two or three questions that assessed student understanding of the source were part of each document.

Incorporating Howland's recommendations, I reviewed the document-based assessment questions. The expectation was that the students restate each question and use details from the document to indicate their understanding of the information that was presented in the document. Prior to

the assessment, the class and I discussed each of the documents so that there was a thorough understanding of the document before answering the related questions. Then, I collected and carefully noted and commented on each student's work, ensuring that the answers showed an understanding of the material prior to proceeding to the essay. Results of the assessment showed a great deal of confusion with the Minister Cotton Mather Sermon document so I revisited the primary source. We discussed the document further until I was sure the class understood the context and possible motivation for the sermon. Assessment drives instruction.

As a class, we then explored the possible causes of the Salem Witch Hysteria. While reviewing the documents, students were able to gather possible causes that included the ministers losing power, the rigid faith of the Salem Puritans, the mischievous behavior of the teenage girls seeking attention, real medical conditions affecting the people of Salem, and the geography of Salem Town and Salem Village. Students stated the reason that he or she believed caused the hysteria used the documents to defend his or her position. Each student had to choose and address two other possible reasons for the hysteria while defending the claim that he or she chose in his or her essay.

Using the strategies that I discovered on the DBQ Project, I was able to teach and model the use of bucketing to sort ideas, a chicken foot to develop a thesis and a guided essay form to take students step by step through their first DBQ essays. I assessed each activity separately as each is an important tool in developing students' writing skills. Each activity met with differing degrees of success. Students who were more motivated to write used the tools with ease. Students who struggle with writing needed additional support and in some cases reteaching in order realize success. The resources that I have discovered and implemented as part of this module have had a tremendous impact on the achievement of my students.

Impact on Student Learning

Currently, eighth grade is the first time students are exposed to DBQs. In reflection, students from previous years did not master the DBQ skills that my students did this year. Through investigating and utilizing new assessment strategies in the area of DBQs, my students have benefited a great deal. At the beginning of this module, my students were not able to successfully respond to a document-based question or an accompanying document-based writing assignment. After implementing these new assessment strategies, my students are meeting with a great deal of success in composing answers to DBQs and writing argumentative essays and letters that are based in historic documents.

As explained throughout the Impact on Practice Section of this paper, the DBQ project that I used this year included several dip-stick type assessments that provided me with on-going information on how to better support my students. In the end, the students were more successful in restating thoughts and ideas, synthesizing information and using evidence from the documents and prior knowledge to answer document-based questions. Students utilized writing tools to develop grabbers, thesis statements, topic sentences, transitions and conclusions. With the continuous use of progress monitoring to better understand the level of student understanding and to share teacher feedback, I was more informed on how to support students. The students realized greater success in meeting the objectives of the lessons as indicated on the post-assessment data.

Direct one-on-one feedback through student conferencing resulted in drawing students' attention to strengths and areas in need of additional practice. As an example, some students had difficulty keeping to the topic of the paragraph. Through conferencing and small group instruction, I

taught students a self-assessment in which they read the topic sentence and then each sentence in the paragraph looking to see if the sentence was directly related to the topic sentence. As a result of this type of self-assessment, higher quality document-based essays were produced by each student.

At the start of the assessment module, my students were not able to thoroughly complete a document-based question and most were unable to write a document-based essay that was properly constructed and cited. I assessed student ability to successfully write a response to a DBQ at the onset of the American Revolution unit. I progress monitored throughout the weeks by repeatedly evaluating student DBQ responses and writing on the Salem DBQ project and on the subsequent Valley Forge DBQ Project. Each student successfully wrote a five paragraph essay by using a grabber, writing an effective thesis statement, including evidence from the documents, using topic sentences and transitions and creating a well-worded conclusion.

I used the same teaching practices and strategies with a subsequent DBQ Project, Valley Forge: Would You Have Quit? It was evident that students retained many of the skills that were taught and reinforced throughout the preceding Salem project. Michael Yell is correct when he points out that the use of DBQs leads to improved literacy skills and added engagement of students in their learning and assessment.